Stephen Winick: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I’m Stephen Winick, Folklorist at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, and the creator of the Folklife Today blog. I’m here with John Fenn, the head of Research and Programs at the Center.

John Fenn: Hey, folks! Spring is just around the corner, and we thought we’d do an episode on Springtime songs to go along with our winter and summer songs episodes. We have sounds of spring throughout the collections and we thought we’d share some of our favorites.

Stephen Winick: That’s right. We have our own favorites, and we’ve asked our friend and colleague Theadocia Austen to come along and help us talk about some of our archival recordings of springtime songs. So let’s welcome Thea to the Podcast!

Theadocia Austen: Hi, and thanks for having me on!

Stephen Winick: I wonder if you’d like to get us started, John?

John Fenn: Sure. I guess there’s no better way to start than “Early Early in the Spring.” This is a real classic, and we have a lot of different versions of it from Scotland and from Kentucky and from all over. But this is one of the most complete versions of this old lament I’ve ever heard. And this was sung for John Lomax by Pearl Nye, who was an Ohio Canal Boat captain. So let’s hear “Early in the Spring.”

[Music: Early in the Spring]

Stephen Winick: Wow, what a great version of that song, Early in the Spring by Pearl Nye!
John Fenn: Yes, I especially love how, after she tells him she never received his letters, he goes out walking in London Town and what should he find lying in the street but one of his letters, proving that she wasn’t to blame for thinking he had abandoned her and moving on.

Theadocia Austen: I also love how after he blames all women for his misfortune, she tells him it wasn’t her fault so he should stop blaming women! I like the pushback on his misogyny!

Stephen Winick: Excellent point, Thea. So, have you got a song for us?

Theadocia Austen: Yes, I’ll stay on the topic of early spring! Back in 1994, the American Folklife Center worked with our friend Jeff Warner, who is a singer and musician as well as the son of the collectors Frank and Anne Warner. And together we brought a family of traditional English singers to perform at the Library of Congress, the Copper Family. They are a very important family of tradition bearers from Sussex, going back over two hundred years now, and collections from this family were important in the founding of the Folk Song Society. They are unusual in English traditional song because they sing in harmony. In 1994, the grand old man of the family was Bob Copper, and he has since passed away. But, 43 years before he sang for us, back in 1951, Bob Copper and his father Jim sang for Alan Lomax. And one of the songs they sang was a lovely pastoral folksong about early spring called “When Spring Comes On.”

John Fenn: Let’s hear it!

06:55
[Music: When Spring Comes On]

09:45
Stephen Winick: Once again Bob and Jim Copper back in 1951. I love the Copper Family, by the way, and just featured them in a blog, so this is a good time to remind people that they can find more information about all these songs at blogs.loc.gov/folklife.

John Fenn: I guess that means it’s your turn, Steve.

Stephen Winick: OK, I’m ready! One of the things we think about in spring is the coming of new vegetation, both crops and flowers. So this is a song on that topic from Alan Lomax’s Haiti collection from 1937, recorded March 23rd, so a nice spring song. And it’s called Fleurs, Certaines Jolies Fleurs,
which just means Flowers, some pretty flowers. And it’s kind of funny because they put out a box set of the Haitian materials a few years ago, and they transcribed this song as saying “Fleurs, Certaines Jolies Fleurs, Mon Capitaine, clairon clairon, clairon, des bras, des bras, which they then translated as Flowers, some pretty flowers, my captain, bugle, bugle, bugle! To Arms! To Arms!” Of course in French bras means arms like a person’s limbs but it does not mean arms in the sense of guns, so this is pretty nonsensical and I listened, and I’m pretty sure it’s actually “Fleurs, Certaines Jolies Fleurs, Mon Capitaine, fleurant, fleurant, fleurant, des bois, des bois,” which means “Flowers, some pretty flowers, my captain, blooming blooming, blooming, from the woods, from the woods.” Fleurs des bois is a common expression to mean woodland wildflowers in French. This makes much more sense, so I’m sticking with that as my translation.

John Fenn: So the moral of that story is, don’t always trust other people’s transcriptions! Let’s hear it!

11:36
[Music: Fleurs Certaines Jolies Fleurs]

Stephen Winick: So again that was from Haiti, and that was sung by Baptiste Pierre in 1937. So using that as a springboard, as it were, John do you have any songs having to do with Spring growth?

12:47
John Fenn: I see what you did there, Steve. And I do have a song, too. You know, I did a lot of work on our Juan B. Rael Collection for a StoryMap, and in that collection there were these hymns to the dawn called Alabados or Alabanzas. And I recently found that we have similar Alabanzas in a later collection made by John Donald Robb. So this is an Alabanza, a brief hymn to the dawn, sung by Rubén Cobos in Albuquerque in 1963. And before he sings it on the tape, he talks about it in Spanish a little, and he says:

At the approach of spring, the time of planting, the fathers of the church would come out to bless the fields of the New Mexicans. And there were, of course, alabanzas that people sang at five in the morning, because these people were farmers, and they had to get up at that time of day. They sang an alabanza that I have always liked very much and that I learned from the lips of Don Prospero Bacade Bernalillo.

Stephen Winick: Great. and this alabanza is just called “El Alba,” the dawn.
Stephen Winick: So I’m going to do my second song, and then Thea will get the final slot. So mine is an old love song called “Nightingales of Spring.” It was recorded by Sidney Robertson Cowell from Warde Ford in California in 1939. She had known the Ford family from her previous collecting in Wisconsin and when she got to California she found three brothers had moved out there for work on the Shasta Dam. Warde Forde even tells us where he learned it—I think it’s from his mother. So let’s hear “Nightingales of Spring.”

John Fenn: That was Nightingales of Spring. So let me get this straight: he’s been away at war, and he comes back and sees his girlfriend, so he decides to fool her by pretending he’s a different guy but he was with her boyfriend when he died, and her boyfriend wants her to marry this stranger?

Stephen Winick: Yeah, that’s kind of how this whole genre works.

John Fenn: I know, but doesn’t that seem even more crazy than most of these songs?

Stephen Winick: Yeah, it’s kind of weird but it’s really common in those old songs as you know. And it’s kind of the opposite of the Pearl Nye song because she’s almost pathologically loyal and he tests her anyway in this somewhat cruel way.

Theadocia Austen: Let me just say that we do not condone this behavior!

Stephen Winick: You are so right! Don’t try this at home kids—she’ll probably kill you!

John Fenn: Spring affects us all in different ways. So I think that does it for Spring songs, but I believe Thea has brought along a tune to play us out. But first, let’s thank Thea Austen for being our guest today.

Theadocia Austen: Thanks for having me on!
Stephen Winick: And let’s thank our engineer Jon Gold and all our colleagues at the Library of Congress who help us get these podcasts made. And of course, thank you, John.

John Fenn: Thanks to you too Steve. And now Thea can tell us about the final tune.

19:45
Theadocia Austen: Well, Steve and I were talking the other day, and I mentioned that one of the things I miss in the pandemic is dancing. And all my folk dance friends have had a lot of trouble and anxiety about dancing. So I found a nice dance tune to play us out. This is the Spring Polka, from the Spring Concert of the Chicago Zither Club in 1977. It’s part of our Chicago Ethnic Arts Project Collection, and as always you can find out more at blogs.loc.gov/folklife. Let’s polka!

20:19
[Music: Spring Polka]